

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Ballymara Road

Written by Nadine Dorries

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

NADINE DORRIES

The Ballymara
Road



First published in the UK in 2015 by Head of Zeus Ltd.

Copyright © Nadine Dorries, 2015

The moral right of Nadine Dorries to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN (HB) 9781781857649
ISBN (XTPB) 9781781850091
ISBN (E) 9781781857632

Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed and bound in Germany by GGP
Media GmbH, Pössneck

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45–47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For Clifford

1959–1991

It's a long way to Tipperary...

Chapter One

IT WAS EARLY on Christmas morning at St Vincent's convent in Galway.

'Frank, wake up, did ye hear that?' Maggie O'Brien prodded her sleeping husband in the back, in an attempt to wake him. 'Frank, 'tis someone knocking on the lodge gate. Wake up now.'

Frank O'Brien was not in bed with his wife. Deep in the heart of a dream, he had just won first prize for his best onions at the Castlefeale show. All around him, people clapped and cheered as he stood at the front of the produce tent, holding high a bunch of onions so big, brown and sweetly perfect that it aroused naked envy in the eyes of the assembled gardeners and farmers.

'Frank, will ye fecking wake up, 'tis the gate. Who can it be, knocking at this ungodly hour? 'Tis the middle of the night.'

Frank woke with a start, as his ethereal body entered its earthly form with an unpleasant jolt. Startled, he begrudgingly opened one eye and viewed the world of the living. His first-prize elation faded within seconds. Blinking in the darkness, he rolled over to face his wife, but she had already leapt

out of bed and nimbly hopped onto the wooden bench under the high, arched, mullioned window that looked down onto the main gate.

As the bench rocked back and forth, precariously and noisily, on the uneven stone floor, Maggie reached up to draw the heavy curtains and, in doing so, exposed her plump and naked backside beneath her old and tattered nightdress.

This is no ordinary morning, thought Frank. It feels special.

‘Ah, ’tis Christmas,’ he said, smiling as he focused his gaze on his wife’s round buttocks.

Maggie was blissfully unaware of her husband’s burgeoning arousal as she attempted to peer out, carefully peeling the curtains back from the thick layer of ice that coated the inside of the window.

‘Merciful God, it has snowed heavily overnight. I don’t know how that car has made it here. Maybe it has trouble, that’s why they is knocking,’ Maggie hissed as she rubbed her eyes, blinded by the car’s headlights reflected in the window.

‘Tis odd, indeed, to be knocking on a convent gate at this time,’ said Frank, swinging his legs out of bed to place his feet on the cold stone floor.

All thoughts of an early romp between the sheets with his Maggie disappeared as she finally managed to draw the curtains, leaving behind thin threads of fabric stuck fast to the ice.

Frank squinted as the car headlights flooded the small lodge with their brilliance. ‘Fecking hell, I can’t see a thing, ’tis so bright,’ he said furiously.

Frank and Maggie worked as the gardener and cook at St

Vincent's convent, on the outskirts of Galway. It had been in existence for just a few years, having been hurriedly established by local Catholic dignitaries and busybodies to meet what they believed were declining moral standards amongst the local female population. It was five miles away from the more established Abbey, which was run by the same order of nuns and so full to the rafters with sin that it couldn't possibly take any more.

The convent chiefly comprised the large main house and an adjoining chapel, connected by a long passageway. A mother and baby home occupied the top floor and the girls – mothers and penitents alike – slept in the attics. Closest to the elements, they froze in winter and boiled in summer. A chapel house in the grounds was home to a retreat, used mainly by visitors from Dublin. An orphanage lay on the outskirts of the convent, almost entirely concealed from sight by an overgrown hedge of juniper trees.

Maggie and Frank, who also doubled up as gatekeepers, lived in the tiny lodge at the entrance to the grounds, which was as near to the main house as any man was allowed after dark, unless he was a priest. Frank maintained the grounds and grew enough produce to ensure that the convent remained amply supplied. Maggie ran the kitchens with the help of the orphans, who, as she constantly grumbled, were used as nothing more than slaves by the sisters, even though they were paid for by the state.

Maggie and Frank had grave misgivings about both the mother and baby home and the orphanage, but they were wise enough to keep their own counsel and, with it, the roof over their heads.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it is not yet five o’clock in the mornin’,” said Frank, as he pulled on a donkey jacket over his nightshirt. Then, placing his cap on his head, he stepped out through the front door into the snow, making for the pedestrian gate set into the green iron railings attached to the lodge.

‘Have ye trouble?’ he asked, shining his torch into the face of the tall man outside the gate.

Frank felt as though ice-cold water drizzled down his spine as the man’s eyes met his. He wore a trilby hat, not usually seen in the country and certainly never before on any visitor to the convent. It was pulled down low, obscuring his face, and his overcoat was buttoned up to the neck, with a scarf wrapped around his mouth.

‘No, no trouble. I think I am expected,’ the man replied through the scarf in a muffled English accent.

‘Not here,’ said Frank. ‘I have no message to expect ye and I’m the gatekeeper. Is it the Abbey ye want? If so, ’tis a further five miles towards Galway. Ye do know it’s Christmas morning, don’t ye? We aren’t expecting anyone at the retreat today.’

As soon as Frank had spoken, he heard Sister Theresa’s voice behind him.

‘I will deal with this, thank you, Frank.’

‘Reverend Mother, what are ye doing out in the snow at this time in the mornin’?’

Frank was incredulous. Life at the convent followed a very strict routine. No one ever caught sight of Sister Theresa before she began prayers at five-thirty and never, since the day Frank arrived, had she walked down to the gatehouse to

meet a visitor. Not in fine weather, and very definitely not in the snow, at four in the morning.

‘That will be all, thank you, Frank,’ Sister Theresa replied curtly. ‘You can step back indoors now. I will deal with this.’

Frank turned to look at the stranger once more. He didn’t like him. He said later to Maggie, ‘He was shifty-looking, all right, and something about him made my skin crawl.’

‘Well, who will lock the gate then, Reverend Mother? Sure, I can’t leave it wide open.’

Frank was not as keen to move indoors as Sister Theresa would have liked. He did not like disruption any more than she did.

‘Wait then, Frank, and lock the gate when we have finished.’ Sister Theresa, distracted, had already begun talking to the man directly. ‘It’s impossible. You can’t drive the car up,’ she said. ‘She will have to walk. There is no guarantee you would make it, either there or back again. The slope leading to the house is very steep.’

The man appeared relieved. ‘I would rather just hand her over here, if it is all the same to you,’ he replied. ‘The bishop said he didn’t want her to be seen, so I hope everything is as discreet here as it should be.’

Frank noted the sideways glance the man threw in his direction.

‘There is only one return ferry to Liverpool today and I need to be on it.’

Frank watched as the man opened the back door of the car; to his amazement, a young woman stepped out. She was very well dressed, wearing a smart hat, and although the man had clearly woken her from sleep, she appeared quite content.

She also recognized Sister Theresa. ‘Hello, Reverend Mother,’ she said enthusiastically. ‘Are they here?’

‘Hello, Daisy,’ said Sister Theresa, who, it appeared to Frank, was less than pleased.

The man lifted a small suitcase from the boot of the car and placed it on the frozen ground, next to the girl, saying, ‘I will be off now.’

And Frank, with his mouth half open in shock, watched as he jumped into his car and drove away. Sister Theresa turned on her heel and marched up the driveway, with the young and tired woman following along behind.

‘Well now, it never broke anyone’s mouth to say a kind word and yet no one out there had one, not even for the young woman, although she looked as though she could do with one and as likely give one back, it being Christmas morning an’ all.’

Frank made this speech at the back door as he removed his coat and cap, shaking snowflakes onto the floor, before he hung them both up to dry.

He gratefully took a mug of tea out of Maggie’s waiting hand. Much to Frank’s disappointment, she was now dressed in a long, black quilted dressing gown, decorated in bright red roses as large as dinner plates. Her hair was wrapped in a turban-style headscarf and her eyes twinkled, alight with curiosity concerning their early visitor.

‘Was she a postulant, maybe?’ she asked eagerly. ‘Although, sure, ’tis an odd time to be arriving, on a Christmas morning.’

‘I have no notion, Maggie, but no postulant arrives wearing a hat as nice as that one. We know from your sister’s

girl that anything half decent they leave behind for the family to wear. What use is a fancy hat to a postulant? I know this much, the Reverend Mother recognized her and called her Daisy.'

'Well, I know of no Daisy who has visited here before,' said Maggie thoughtfully.

'Me neither, but then they keep so much secret up at the house, what would we know anyway? They told me the nuns was digging that land for medicinal herbs and yet there's not a sign of anything green put into the ground, but they keep on digging.'

They both stood and looked at each other.

'Is it blasphemous to say what I think is happening?' whispered Maggie.

'Aye, I think it probably is,' Frank replied. 'When I asked the priest what they had been digging for, he near exploded in front of me eyes and ripped the tongue right out of me head, so he did.'

Maggie and Frank both made the sign of the cross and blessed themselves.

'Well, I'm sure the nuns and the priest know what they are doing and, sure, 'tis none of our business. We're here to grow food, cook it and answer the gate. We should remember that.'

Frank sipped his tea. He hadn't told Maggie that he had seen babies and children being carried out from the orphanage and laid in the earth. No coffins, no prayers, no headstones. Just two stone-faced nuns with a couple of shovels.

The nuns had used older girls in the orphanage to help dig the huge burial plot, for those unfortunate enough to succumb

to any one of the diseases that stalked the cold, damp building, to claim the malnourished and broken in soul.

Frank couldn't tell Maggie about that. It would be the end. Every day she threatened to leave, but where would they go?

'No point in getting back to bed now, is there, Maggie. The cold has woken me for good.'

'Please yerself. There's another hour waiting for me under that eiderdown and I'm not wasting it.'

Maggie slipped under the covers, still wearing her dressing gown, and soon filled the room with her snores, seconds after switching off the lamp.

Frank smiled at his wife. He couldn't have slept even if he had wanted to. He had never slept well since the eviction. Reaching up to the mantelpiece, he took down his dudeen and, pushing in a new plug of baccy, he slowly lit up, drawing the air in through the long clay stem.

A proud and hard-working tenant farmer, Frank had made his farm so productive over a period of twenty years that it became highly attractive to potential buyers. Never one to miss an opportunity to line his pockets with gold, his landlord had sold the fields right out from under them at auction, giving Frank and Maggie twenty-four hours to pack up and leave. It was a shock so huge that neither of them had fully recovered even to this day.

By a fortuitous coincidence, just as Frank and Maggie were made homeless, the sisters arrived and took up residence in what would become St Vincent's.

Their arrival had been announced at mass at their local church, the day before Frank and Maggie were evicted from

their home. It had been a Sunday just like any other, when they had lit the fire, milked the cows, had rashers and tatties for breakfast and walked to mass.

Frank could remember every single second of that last Sunday on the farm and he frequently replayed each one in his mind as he went about his work.

The landlord had not even had the courtesy to inform them he was putting the farm and their home up for auction. Their only clue came in the form of a tall man in a scruffy suit, who had arrived unannounced and began strutting around the farm on the Friday afternoon.

‘Landlord sent me,’ was all he said to Frank as he left his car parked across the gate and then strode out along the bottom field, peering into the ditches.

Frank had worried all weekend.

‘If there was anything to worry about, the landlord’s agent would have told us,’ Maggie had protested. ‘Stop fretting, ye panic when there’s nothin’ to panic about.’

Yet all the time she had felt so sick with anxiety herself that she was unable to eat or sleep. A cold hand of fear had rested on her shoulder and there it had remained ever since.

The priest in the local church had been overly excited about the nuns arriving and the establishment of St Vincent’s. Nuns spoilt priests and that was a fact.

‘The sisters are here to protect your loose morals. The bishop has recognized that I, being the only man of Christ’s teaching in the area, am indeed struggling,’ he had announced in a scathing tone.

‘Who is he talking about, Frank?’ Maggie had whispered.

‘I’ve no idea, Maggie, but they say ’tis free love all over the world, especially in Liverpool. They have the Beatles and everything. Maybe they’s worried we will be next, all lovin’ each other.’

Maggie knew it wasn’t funny and she tried hard not to laugh. One of the daughters on the adjoining farm had become pregnant without any notion of free love and she had been sent away to the Abbey. It had been a shock to Maggie, who had thought the girl a beauty, both in looks and in nature, and Maggie failed to understand how she had become pregnant at all.

‘Tis beyond me. She has never set foot away from her own farm and family. How in God’s name could she be pregnant?’

Four years later, the girl had still not returned, and she wasn’t the only one.

The sisters had moved into an old manor house that had been deserted by an English lord following the potato famine and had been purchased, via the Vatican, at a knock-down price. It didn’t take long for the nuns to realize that their order had bitten off far more than they could chew.

The gardens and land had not been tended in many years and were as wild as any jungle. With men and young boys from the village leaving for Liverpool to join their friends in building homes and laying roads on the mainland, labour at home was scarce.

As soon as the priest heard what had happened to Frank and Maggie, he had taken them straight to St Vincent’s. The newly established sisters needed considerable assistance with the overgrown and rundown manor, and the priest became a

hero in their eyes for finding it in the shape of the rotund, married, middle-aged Frank.

Frank had not been truly happy since the day they had arrived. Although he loved working in the large gardens, there were strange goings-on up at the convent that made him feel very unsettled.

‘I would love to know that the potatoes and vegetables I grow find their way onto the plates of the children in the orphanage,’ he said to Maggie, ‘but how can they? Them kids look half starved. The skin is hanging off their bones.’

Maggie was equally perturbed.

‘I cook only for the nuns and the retreat. The orphanage has its own kitchen. I don’t know what the orphans eat. Almost nothing is delivered up there. I have no idea where our slops go. They don’t go to the pig man, but they disappear from the bucket, sure enough. I hope to God the orphans aren’t fed that. It would taste too disgusting for anyone to eat. Surely not, Frank?’

Frank shook his head. The truth was, neither of them knew and they dared not ask.

Frank and Maggie knew very little of the convent’s business. Their hours were strict and their routine rigid. They simply provided and cooked the food. That was their role, nothing more nor less, other than manning the gates.

Frank pulled on his pipe and inhaled deeply. Something in the eyes of the man who had dropped the woman off that morning had made Frank feel uneasy.

When Maggie rose an hour later, Frank was still on the settle, nursing his empty mug in one hand and his extinguished pipe in the other.